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S E R M O N,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

Presbyterian Churches of Cleveland,

ON THE

NATIONAL FAST DAY,

September 26, 1861.

BY J. B. BITTINGER,

PASTOR OF THE EUCLID STREET PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

CLEVELAND:

PRINTED BY F. COWLES & CO., LEADER JOB ROOMS, 142 SUPERIOR ST.

1861.

CORRESPONDENCE.

CLEVELAND, O., Sept. 28, 1861.

REV. J. B. BITTINGER—*Dear Sir*:—We but express the desire of many of our citizens, who listened to the discourse preached by you on the National Fast Day, and of many, also, who were unable to be present at its delivery, in soliciting from you a copy for publication.

S. C. AIKEN,
THOMAS BOLTON,
HENRY L. HITCHCOCK,
H. B. HURLBUT,
S. WITT,
S. N. SANFORD,
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WILLIAM H. GOODRICH,
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R. J. FULLER.

CLEVELAND, O., Sept. 28, 1861.

S. C. AIKEN, THOMAS BOLTON, H. L. HITCHCOCK, S. J. ANDREWS, and others—
Gentlemen :—I have received your polite note, requesting for publication a copy of the sermon preached on the occasion of the National Fast, and, without apologizing for any of its imperfections, I hereby put it at your disposal.

Hoping and believing, gentlemen, that we shall together enjoy yet many years of prosperity, as citizens of an undivided and free country.

I remain yours with respect,

J. E. BITTINGER.

S E R M O N.

Numbers, 32: 23.—BUT IF YE WILL NOT DO SO, BEHOLD YE HAVE SINNED AGAINST THE LORD, AND BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT.

When the children of Israel had driven out the heathen nations, on the east side of Jordan, and were about to cross over for the conquest of Canaan proper; Reuben, and Gad, and the half tribe of Manassah, being the principal stock-growers of the nation, requested permission to remain in the well watered and grassy uplands of Gilead, because said they “it is a land for cattle, and thy servants have cattle.” The request was granted on condition that they should assist the remaining tribes in the conquest of Canaan, and after their brethren were established in their homes on the west of the river, then they should return and possess the east—“but” said Moses, “If ye will not do so, behold ye have sinned against the Lord, and BE SURE YOUR SIN WILL FIND YOU OUT.” In these words of Moses, we recognize a general principle; one that is applicable now as it was then, a principle that is fundamental to all government. It may be stated in these words:

LAW IS VINDICATIVE.

God has breathed a life into every statute that he has enacted, and whenever any of these laws are broken, they will certainly avenge themselves—the mode and time of vindication may differ, but the vindication is sure to come,

and when it does come, is sure to be adequate. Natural laws generally avenge themselves so uniformly and so speedily, that scientific men have not unfrequently disparaged and even denied the vindicative character of moral laws. In agriculture, bad farming ensures bad crops—the sins of bad farming quickly find a man out. In Hygeine, a bad life is followed sooner or later, by bad health. Sins here will find a man out. In social life, bad principles will sooner or later bring disgrace. Vengeance is on the track of every offender, and will surely overtake him. We know this to be true in the natural world, and our conscience and inspiration affirm it to be true, in the moral world. Indeed it would be derogatory to our highest conceptions of God, as the supreme law giver, to append sanctions to his lowest laws and omit them from the highest. Sanctions are the crown and sceptre of law, not an incident but an element of its royalty,—and to send out his statutes without their penalties, would be to uncrown them, and to degrade them from the dignity of law, to the humiliation of advice. “Of Law,” says Hooker, ‘there can be no less acknowledged, than that her seat is the bosom of God, and her voice the harmony of the world; all things in heaven and earth do her homage, the very least as feeling her care, and the greatest as not exempted from her power.’ Do these majestic words describe advice? that which a friend may give to his equal? nay, which even an inferior may proffer to his superior? Do they not rather describe the language of sovereignty? And if this authoritative speech is uttered by the laws of his footstool, shall we say that it is not heard in the statutes that issue from his throne?

We may accept it therefore as a sound inference, that penalties are an essential part of all laws, and that whenever any law is violated, the offender must and will suffer. In the

natural world, there is no escape from this irrevocable decree, except by a miracle—some sovereign act of suspension or repeal. In the moral world the same is true. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die;” is the inspired utterance of the law giver himself, and unless repealed or suspended, the dishonored law will avenge itself. Now the one great miracle in the moral world, is the death of Christ. It is the source of every arrest of judgment, of every reprieve, of every acquittal. This is the law in respect to individuals. Of those aggregates of individuals, called nations, it is said, “the nation and kingdom that will not serve God shall perish.” This is a particular form of the text—“and be sure your sin will find you out.” Vengeance is on the track of guilty nations, no less than on that of guilty men—but there is this important difference, the nation must be overtaken in this world. Nations as such have no existence hereafter, and therefore, if their sins find them out, it must be here. If the nation that does not serve God shall perish, it must perish here.

The text suggests another principle—OFFENDERS ARE PUNISHED IN THE LINE OF THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS. Law is not merely vindictive, but it avenges itself in kind, “and be sure *your* sin will find you out”—not other sins, nor other people’s sins—but *your* sin. The drunkard is not punished for theft, nor the liar for gluttony; but each penalty moves on the track of its own sin. Perfidious nations are punished by perfidy, and for perfidy; covetous nations for covetousness, and by covetousness. Summoned by the President of the United States, to observe a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer, on account of our sins as a people, we must first know what those sins are, before we can rightly confess them, bewail them, and turn from them. Our sins will help us to understand our punishment, as also our punishment will help us to discover our sins—and both, I trust will teach us to

abhor and forsake them. In enquiring, what are national sins, we should make some distinctions. There are national sins, in which many individuals of the nation have no part, and to which they give no countenance. It is also true that there are many individual sins which are not national, and which do not affect the national welfare, nor provoke national judgments. National sins are those in which the great body of the people participate, either by committing them, or refusing to protest against their commission. National sins are embodied in the manners, customs and laws of a people; and especially are they such sins as are committed by our rulers and approved of, or tolerated by the people. In a government where the subject can vote as well as pray against sin, corrupt rulers are the real and perhaps the truest exponents of national sins. In the light of these views, let us see what are some of our national sins.

It seems to me that, *our first national sin is materialism.* The habit of the national mind is to give undue prominence to material as opposed to moral interests. Our history has exposed us peculiarly to this gross influence. The large territory into the possession of which, the first emigrants to this country came, favored the growth of materialism. Agriculture was unlimited, save by the primeval forests, and the strength of man. Commerce was hardy and restrained by few laws. Manufactures were left open to the demands of necessity, and the promptings of enterprise.

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide—"

The opportunity to grow rich presented itself to many, and the many embraced the opportunity. Industry, enterprise and freedom were frequently, and compared with the old

country, speedily rewarded by competence; and even affluence. We suffered not our land-marks to grow fast, but added field to field, and farm to farm till we grow covetous of land. In gratifying this territorial passion, the tide of emigration set steadily westward, in search of new and unopened regions. In leaving the scanty fields of the east, we left home, parents, laws, schools, churches, and almost every conservation and refining influence. We poured ourselves on the broad acres of the west, forgetting that its waste wilderness would drink up our spiritual forces. Every material interest prospered, and we were satisfied. But each year opened new territories, and stimulated anew this material thirst; and for more than two centuries this dispersion has been going on in the United States. Nor has its hardening influence been confined to Americans. The tide of European emigration, which for centuries has annually broken on our shore is mainly composed of men seeking "to better their fortune." Cheap lands, a freehold and the elective franchise attract them. With those thoughts of material progress and prosperity,—leaving home, education and religion behind, they cross the Atlantic, surmount the Alleghanies, and pour themselves over the broad prairies of the west. From old, and effete Asia comes another wave of the same character, spreading itself along the Pacific slope. Even Africa sends its unlawful hordes to debase us, while the filth of all nations is draining into the valley of Salt Lake. The best motives seldom act in emigration, and the emigration to, and in this country, is no exception to the rule. No nation ever grew faster than America, but it has been mainly a material growth—crude, gross and debasing. The well-known character of our frontier is proof of the assertion. This territorial covetousness has had its national, as well as individual

manifestations. Under its hardening influence, we have despoiled the Indian, and dispossessed him. We have expelled imbecile Mexico from her home. We have furnished filibusters against Cuba and Nicaragua, and have "gaped upon" the territory of all our neighbors. As the result of these favoring influences of materialism, we are, unless we except the employees of the East India company, and the settlers of Australia; the most money making, money worshipping people in the world.

Our next great national sin is licentiousness. The spurning of restraint. Making light of law. Despising authority. Exalting the individual above the state. The same causes, which have exposed us to the temptations of materialism, have operated unfavorably on our sentiments of respect for authority and reverence for the law. Independence, amounting to arbitrariness, is the characteristic of the American mind. The first settlements of this country were a refuge and reaction from the despotism in church and state, in the old world. Hence our liberty always tended to licence. The democratic spirit, inherent in man, was little restrained. The spirit of the country has been, to make every man a citizen, and every man, if he desired it, an office-holder. Our large territory and our extended frontier favored this unbridled feeling. The vast emigration, composed largely of recusants, and persons fleeing from the restraints of law and religion, no less than from the narrow limits of land and enterprise, revelled in the freedom here thrust upon them. The wide competition opened for office-seekers, made this country the paradise of demagogues. Weak and vain constituents willing to be flattered, and wicked and wily men willing to do it. Engrafted upon the coarse stock of materialism, the product of this excess of freedom could not be very choice.

The insidious sophism of independence spread its poison every where. It infected the family, untying all restraints. It corrupted the church, turning it over to majorities. It embodied itself in the Declaration of Independence, and in our Godless Constitution. It is a spirit which practically divorces legislation from religion, and though government is an ordinance of God, the ministers of religion, have been stigmatized as "political priests," and fanatics, for attempting to instruct their people on the moral duties of the citizen; and when, in a great national and moral exigency, three thousand clergymen presumed to exercise the right of petition, in protesting against a measure, which they deemed a breach of political faith, and one fraught with divine judgments, they were scorned from the Senate Chamber of the United States, with terms of rebuke, indignity, and calumny; as if men ceased to be citizens when they became Christians.

From this radical sin have come three plagues to afflict this nation. The first of these is the so-called *freedom of speech and the press*. The liberty to say any thing of any body. For fierceness of denunciation, for foulness of vituperation, for meanness of subserviency, and for unblushing mendacity; the campaign political party papers of this country, with few exceptions, have attained an unrivalled, and it is hoped, an unenvied "bad eminence." So infectious is the malady that not a little of this moral unscrupulousness has trailed its slime even through some of our religious papers. I do not know a more humiliating spectacle to contemplate, than the American people during a Presidential campaign, printing and reading its party organs. Coarse rhetoric, sturdy lying and crafty logic, is the food upon which heated partizans feed their independence, and love of liberty. If defamation and falsehood are sins, then we have grievously sinned through

our freedom of speech and the press. Then too, to aggravate the evil, we are a reading people, especially a newspaper reading people; and most emphatically the readers of political papers. The demagogue editor is therefore far more dangerous than the demagogue orator. The latter speaks to a limited number of adult males; his words are only breath, tainted to be sure; but the former stereotypes his libels, puts his falsehoods on record, and sends them out week after week, to poison the women and children, educating them first to despise, and then to hate, their political opponents.

The next plague coming from our nations of independence, and much fostered by the free press spoken of, *is the character of our office-holders.* We have for years exalted to office many of the vilest of men. We have made those our rulers whom we would be ashamed to introduce to our families. Self-seeking and unscrupulous men, flattering the people to blind them, have crept into place and power everywhere. Third-rate men intellectually, and men of no rate morally; men of whom might be said what was said of Leo X., that "he crept into power like a fox, ruled like a lion, and died like a dog." We have flattered ourselves with the delusion that a bad man, an unfaithful husband, and an apostate Christian, could be a good magistrate. Scripture regards magistrates as the ministers of God, but, in the excess of our liberty, and our worship of materialism, we have followed the evil example of Jeroboam, in exalting to office "from the lowest of the people, and consecrating whosoever would" to our high places. And being once in authority, whatever the majority had the power to do, we have declared they had the right to do—thus practically exalting into a political principal the robber maxim that "might makes right." If *our* rulers are corrupt, we are responsible

for it, for both by theory and practice they derive their authority from our consent.

The third plague that has smitten us because of our materialism and arbitrary independence, *is the kind of legislation we have had and have tolerated.* The higher functions of government are seldom carried on on any principles higher than expediency—political expediency, or even partisan expediency. Money is almost as necessary as men. Many who hear me can bear witness that, if you want a measure carried, you must follow Iago's hellish advice, and put money in your purse. The morality of a statute is not its strong recommendation, for not claiming to derive our right to legislate from the divine nature and origin of government, we too generally assume the right to please our party, which is often only another name for benefitting ourselves. Our inalienable legislative rights seem to be: *first*, to do what we please; and *second*, to do what we can.

Our third great national sin is *slavery*. It is our greatest national sin, because it is infiltrated with materialism and licentiousness, and because it is the creature of law. It is an iniquity decreed by statute. American slavery is not merely the right of one man to another man's services; but it is the right of one man to another man; not the right simply to work him, but to sell him. It is the right, by law, to erase the name of his Creator, and write upon him the name of his owner. This terrible forgery carries with it the slave's wife and children, his limbs and senses, his faculties and earnings, and, if it should please God to convert him, his gifts and graces. It takes him out of the category of man and puts him into the schedule of things.

When the present Emperor of France came to the throne, he caused to be erased from the facades of the public build-

ings, LIBERTY—EQUALITY—FRATERNITY, and to be put in their place “Napoleon III.” and everywhere the heart of freedom recoiled from the sacrilege; but what is that to the despotism of slavery, which has attempted by statute to erase from the brow of the negro the word MAN, and write in its place, THING! —attempting to uncreate the work of the Creator, and if too impotent to destroy, was at least impious enough to desecrate. Can Heaven brook such high insult, such defiant blasphemy?

This is the system which the American people have taken to the bosom of fifteen of their state constitutions, and which of late, they have attempted, by judicial sentence, to enshrine as the palladium of our liberties, within the walls of the Federal Constitution. We profess to be a free people, regarding liberty as an inalienable right, or, as Jefferson had first written it, *sacred*; yet we own four millions of human beings, and can drive them to market to morrow. We profess to be a civilized people, and maintain, by law, the lowest form of barbarism. We profess to be Christians, and after enjoying the light of nineteen centuries of Christianity, measure out to the slave the darkness of Egypt, and call it the dawn of the millennium. We profess to be a just people, and behold the hire of the laborers, who have reaped down our fields, which is of us kept back by fraud, crieth unto God. We profess to be Protestant Christians, and seal by law “the word of God from the slave.” We profess to be Democrats, and by law have transferred every slave vote to the hand of the oppressor. We profess to honor the family, the marriage relation, and by law put both at the mercy the master and his creditors. Is there no sin in these heaven-defying contradictions?

But this is not all. Its power to beget sin has made it more formidable than its own iniquity. It is the snaky head of

Medusa, poisoning all it touches, and petrifying all who look upon it. The materialism of our own country readily gathered about it. It represented in the foreign markets from one to two hundred millions of dollars annually. One hundred thousand men mainly controlled that money. These men, largely elected by the very slaves whom they owned, legislated for the nation at Washington. They held the balance of political power, and shaped the course of the whole government. Wherever this interest worked it bred sin. It never allowed itself to be treated as a moral question, and for four score years, in the Federal legislature, we have bowed before this stony deity. His behest was that his victims should be represented in Congress, and the behest was obeyed. In 1820, he demanded the Missouri Compromise to keep freedom from going south of 36:30, and it was granted ; and in 1854 it demanded its repeal to allow slavery to go north of 36:30, and it was granted. It called for the annexation of Texas, and she was annexed, her debts paid, and four slave States erected in advance. It declared war against Mexico and the Government made the war and despoiled her of free territory, to be converted into slave territory. We have allowed this despotic sin to determine who should and who should not hold federal offices. It determined who should be our ministers and consuls abroad, and who should be our agents and officers at home. Its line went out through all the earth, and its words to the end of the world. It touched everything, and everything that it touched it corrupted. I ask, is there no sin in allowing this monster-sin thus to waste and destroy at his pleasure ?

But I will leave the sins to consider their visitation upon us. The text says: "be sure your sin will find you out." The general principle asserted is that law is vindictive. This

has been already considered. The special principal asserted is that the law vindicates itself in the line of its violation. This, too, has been partially unfolded, by showing what some of our national sins are. It only remains to show that we are now suffering the penalty of our sins; or, in the words of the text *our sins have found us out*. Sin and penalty are substance and shadow, each pointing to the other, and each helping to prove the other's reality.

At length our sins have overtaken us. Our materialism blunted our moral sense so that we would not and could not see its benumbing touch, our fine spiritual discernment seemed gone. It defiled our newspapers, it poisoned our public charities, it infested our pulpits, and it depraved our polities. But we went to our farms, our merchandise, and our coarse pleasures. We grew rich and cared not, and only when taxes became too onerous, or official misrule threatened our property, did safety committees spring from indignant communities, and execute a sort of wild justice upon official outlaws. Embezzlements, forgeries, defaultings, dishonest assignments, bankrupt laws, and city and State repudiation, are all proofs of our materialism, and in part the penalties of it. And now comes voracious war to glut itself on our gross wealth—to eat up our selfish gains, and, I trust, to deliver us from the thralldom of national covetousness. We can save our industry our enterprise, our intelligence, and our virtue. It is meant that we shall. We may learn economy, moderation, and trust in God; it is designed that we shall, but the price demanded is our money or our life.

Our sin of licentiousness, too, has overtaken us. First, in respect to the press. No sooner had the doctrine of secession shown itself, than it was manifest that the chief strength of the insurgents lay in their hopes of Northern sympathy and

help. And why this hope? Why? The libertinism of that portion of the press had, by unlimited and persistent falsehood, not only inflamed the passions and prejudices of the South against the North, but had begotten and nourished the belief, that the aid of the democratic and conservative North could be counted on. But now came the avenger. First, these papers, fed and clothed by the government, turn against the government and the maintainance of its rights and dignity. This was one part of the punishment of too free a press. Next followed the diminution of their patronage, that was another chord in the scourge, and then came the suppression of these defamers. Their sin had found them out, and just in proportion as the presses had scorned restraint, they suffered. They sinned much and they suffered much. They sinned for money, and their unrighteous gains destroyed them.

So much for the press, now for the vile office-holders, whom in the exercise of our independence we put into power. Has this sin found us out? Look at their legislation in respect to slavery, ignoring and despising every moral obligation, they passed the compromise of 1830, and now look at Missouri. On both sides of that ill-fated line fraternal blood is poured out to obliterate the stain. They passed the Fugitive slave law of 1850, and look at the dead and dying friends of that measure, and the wounded consciences of thousands. They insisted on repealing the Missouri Compromise in 1854. And the North had her "bleeding Kansas," and the South her John Brown. But it is only when we look at the punishment of slavery, that we see how terribly our sin has found us out. The Constitution for a material consideration gave the slave three-fifths of a vote, and for forty years the owner of that slave has ruled us, and to-day, is in rebellion against us. To please the slave power, the government largely appointed

its sons to the army and navy, and to-day, hardly an officer from under the shadow of slavery, is true to the government. It annexed Florida, and Texas, and to-day we find not only these states in arms against the government, but the very Indians whom we drove out to please Georgia, Florida and Texas, have come back to avenge themselves on us. We gave the south a preponderance of home and foreign offices, and when the war begins, we find most of them in the confidence and employ of the insurgents. We educated their sons at West Point, at the public expense, and to-day they are casting up trenches and pointing guns at the capital. Almost every man that ever touched federal gold has been corrupted by it, and whoever struck hands with the government, while under the control of the slave power, has become its ally and our enemy. Cotton and the negro have come back to us in unrighteous legislation, in immoral compromises, and in the embezzlement of millions of money ; in the larceny of every defence that could be stolen ; in the perjury of hundreds of officials ; in the desertion and treason of states ; in bloody rebellion, and in civil war. The slave has mingled his curse with the cotton which he picked, and the selfish cotton spinner at home and abroad feels it. The long arms of vengeance stretch even across the seas and smites old England, the author and sustainer of our slavery, with the pallid leprosy of fear and famine. Slavery destroyed the whig party, because they determined to let it alone. The helping hand which the great Democratic party stretched out to it, has been palsied and has droped its grasp. The churches that stifled the voice of the oppressed and his helper, have been rent in twain ; and the papers that defended the iniquity have perished. Is there no retribution in all this ? And then turn southward ; the very geography of the institution cries out

against it, not only in the stricken tones of poverty, but in the fiercer tone of treason and bloodshed. From the first formation of the government, political power in the Southern states, has been in the hands of the slave holder. In some states slaves are a necessary qualification. To this degrading tyranny "the poor whites" lazily or cowardly submitted ; and in the great rebellion every one of the slave states, with but one exception, has been sold to treason by the tyrants of the plantation becoming the usurpers of State authority. In Virginia, there were not enough loyal office holders left to carry on a court of justice. Every insignia of office, from the broad seal of the State, to the sign manual of a constable, seceded and organized confiscation and death against those too confiding constituents. So signally have the crime and the penalty trodden in each others footsteps. The more complete the sway of slavery has been, the more intense the hatred fostered against the government ; the more direful will be the vengeance. The free states will suffer much, the free uplands of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Maryland, will suffer more, but that black crescent bordering the Atlantic, the Gulf, and the Mississippi, will suffer most of all. For these many years past, the blood of our brother has cried for vengeance upon his oppressor, and now at length he is beginning to be avenged. How our sin is finding us out. There are to-day three hundred thousand men in arms, to slay each other ; thousands slain already, and thousands more to fall ; and from every family in the land some one has gone or will go to the tented field, and a nation will put on mourning. How our sin comes back. But the end is not yet. The mills of the Gods grind slow, now already three score, and by reason of our hardness, four score years, but they grind fine, very fine, and when they stop, there will be.

I think, not a single slave yoke, or slave whip, or slave fetter, or slave holder, in the land.

But our sin has already found us out, and what shall we do to avert the full punishment? We must repent, and our repentance must be in line of our sins. If we have been guilty of covetousness, it will not do to confess something else; if we regard iniquity in our heart, the Lord will not hear. If we have worshipped mammon, let us repent of our covetousness. If the love of material interests has made us negligent of our liberty, and forgetful of the liberties of others, let us confess our sin, and be vigilant. Let us have a new race of office-holders in the room of those

“Who to party gave up,
What was meant for mankind.”

If we have been faithless to our promises, let us henceforth begin and speak each man truth to his neighbor, and owe no man anything. Let us repent of our pride, our boasting, and our evil inventions. Let us repent of slavery and put it away from us, for “we are verily guilty concerning our brother in that, for centuries, we have seen the anguish of his soul when he besought us, and we would not hear, therefore is this distress come upon us. In the Providence of God slavery has thrust the question upon us. Let us accept the challenge. It is the crisis in our history—not commercial, nor industrial, but moral. We never had a grander opportunity, nor had any nation, to immortalize itself; to die nobly if die we must, to live nobly if live we may. Once and again this question has come before us. Will we write our name in the golden book of national glory? It was offered to us at the adoption of the Constitution, and again on the admission of Missouri, and a third time in the annexation of Texas: but the price we deemed too

high. Each time the Sybil demanded more and offered less, and now for the last time she offers the mutilated volume and asks more than ever—nothing less than the destruction of slavery. Will we pay the price? or shall she close its pages upon us forever? Thus far politicians have overruled us. Let us rise in our might, to the dignity of our full stature, and inscribe our names at the head of the roll. Once and again we have thrown this hell-hound his sop to stop his baying, but he has grown only more noisy, and more hungry, and more fierce. At last he has broken his chain, come up from his infernal kennel, and clutched the master by the throat. Both cannot live. Let the *man* live—let the *beast* die; and let all the people say, Amen!

One thought more and I have done. By our coming together this day; by our confessions and supplications, we profess our faith in God, and the dominion of his justice. We shrink from that justice, and we have appointed a fast to avert our doom; or, if not avert, at least alleviate it. We afflict our souls, and bow down our heads, but shall we call these sorrowful words a fast? or these signs of mourning an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that he has chosen?

To loose the bands of wickedness;

To undo the heavy burdens;

To let the oppressed go free:

And to break every yoke?

Then shall we call, and the Lord will answer.

We sha'll cry, and He shall say: here I am.